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32

MONSTRESS

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THE STORY SO FAR...

Across the Known World, power players and their factions are shoring up allegiances and laying out strategies for the reignited war between humans and Arcanics. But in Ravenna, the site of the war's first battle, the conflicts are more personal. Lord Corvin D'Oro of the Dusk Court is struggling with his decision to abdicate his duties and aid Maika Halfwolf – a decision that indirectly led to grave injury for his sister, Bettani. Kippa, too, is grappling with the bloody consequences of her attempts to help others. And Maika herself is finally facing truths she has long avoided. After pretending to leave Ravenna to throw her pursuers off her trail, Maika set out to confront her aunt, the Warlord of the Dawn Court, only to find her in bed with her new wife – and Maika's dearest friend – Tuya, the Baroness of the Last Dusk. The secrets these three women have kept from each other threaten not just their relationships but the fate of the world itself – and they are finally poised to be revealed.

THE PLAYERS...

MAIKA An Arcanic teen who survived the Great War, and slavery at the hands of the Cumaean witch nuns. Ruthless and haunted, she is determined to uncover the truth behind her mother's murder — and her mother's secrets — in the hope that she can free herself from an ancient and dangerous god called a Monstrum that is imprisoned inside her body and fills her with an otherworldly hunger for human flesh.

ZINN A mysterious, primordial Monstrum of tremendous power that shares Maika's body and mind, and fights her for control. Once considered a god, and drawn into this world by the Shaman-Empress, this Monstrum is driven by a deadly hunger, consuming the lives of humans and Arcanics alike, leaving only their desiccated corpses behind. Though it may give the impression that its only wish is to survive, there's far more to this creature, and its desires, than meets the eye…

KIPPA An Arcanic fox girl saved from slavery by Maika. Innocent and optimistic, she is frightened by the Monstrum — but trusts Maika and will bravely defend her and others by rushing into battles too dangerous for a child.

SIR CORVIN D'ORO An Arcanic Lord, First Watchman of the Court and Commander of the Inner Wall. He is loyal to the Dusk Court but has willingly defied their orders because of his desire to protect Maika and his belief that she can and will serve a greater purpose.

TUYA: Maika's closest friend in the world, who has been with her since before the Battle of Constantine. Unbeknownst to Maika, she is also the Baroness of the Last Dusk, a high-level member of the Arcanic Dusk Court tasked with containing — or even destroying — Maika's power.

WARLORD: The Dawn Court's "Sword of the East," twin sister of Moriko Halfwolf, and Maika's aunt. Ruthless in her ambition, the Warlord's greatest desire is to unravel the mystery behind the destruction of Constantine. She believes the secrets of Constantine will protect the Arcanics in their impending war against the humans — but she does not realize that the answers she seeks lie within her young niece.

GODDESS.

I BEG YOU. PLEASE WATCH OVER BETTANI. FILL HER WITH YOUR HEALING LIGHT. LET YOUR LOVE MOVE THROUGH HER.

GIVE HER THE STRENGTH TO LIVE AND FIGHT.

AND FORGIVE ME... IF YOU CAN.

FORGIVE ME FOR FOLLOWING THE TRUTH OF WHAT I KNOW IN MY HEART.

EVEN IF IT MEANS BRINGING SHAME UPON MY FAMILY.

PERHAPS WITH THE WARLORD'S AIRSHIPS WE CAN BEGIN A PROPER EVACUATION OF THE WOUNDED.

I WOULDN'T COUNT ON IT.

KIPPA?! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!

LORD CORVIN! I FOUND SOME WILLOW-WORT FOR YOUR SISTER'S FEVER, JUST OUTSIDE THE CITY!

BUT...YOU SHOULD BE FAR FROM HERE. VERY, *VERY* FAR.

OH, SORRY ABOUT THAT.

BUT I GUESS MISS ALWAYS INTENDED TO COME RIGHT BACK.

SHE SAID THE BARONESS HAS TOO MANY SPIES.

MISS WANTED HER TO THINK SHE'D LEFT RAVENNA.

GODDESS, NO.

MAIKA!

WIFE, MOVE AWAY!

YOU VILE DEGENERATE.

YOU *DARE* TRESSPASS INTO MY QUARTERS?

I'LL CUT YOUR EYES OUT.

DIDN'T YOU FUCKING HEAR ME?

...

WHERE DID YOU GET THAT NECKLACE?

AUNTIE.

I HEARD YOU'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR ME.

GUARDS, SEIZE HER!

REALLY, THIS IS HOW YOU TREAT YOUR ONLY NIECE?

NO WONDER YOU WEREN'T GRANDMOTHER'S FAVORITE. OR ANYONE ELSE'S.

YOU EVEN SOUND LIKE MORIKO. SHE WAS ALWAYS QUICK WITH THE CHEAP INSULT.

IT'S NOT CHEAP WHEN IT'S TRUE.

GAH!

WSSHHH

YOU SHOULD REALLY LEARN TO CONTROL YOURSELF, AUNTIE.

A VIOLENT TEMPER IS SO UNATTRACTIVE.

WOULDN'T YOU AGREE... BARONESS?

CALM DOWN.

YOUR SISTER IS DEAD. TAKING OUT YOUR ANGER ON HER DAUGHTER IS UNPRODUCTIVE, NO MATTER HOW *ANNOYING* SHE IS.

AND... IT'S FAR TOO PUBLIC FOR THIS CONVERSATION.

TAKE THE HALFWOLF TO THE WARLORD'S AIRSHIP. TELL THE NEW CAPTAIN TO STAND DOWN PREPARATIONS FOR BATTLE AND PREPARE INSTEAD FOR DEPARTURE.

YOU SEEM TO HAVE ALREADY FORGOTTEN THAT YOU DON'T GIVE ORDERS HERE, WIFE.

HEH. THAT'S NOT WHAT I'VE HEARD.

YOU, LAUGH ALL YOU LIKE...

...BUT YOU *WILL* TELL ME EVERYTHING YOU KNOW ABOUT THE WEAPON THAT DESTROYED CONSTANTINE. *YOUR MOTHER'S WEAPON.*

EVEN IF I HAVE TO TEAR HER SECRETS FROM YOU, SCREAM BY SCREAM.

MY MOTHER'S WEAPON?

I'M SURPRISED YOU HAVEN'T ASKED YOUR WIFE.

SHE KNOWS EXACTLY WHAT DESTROYED CONSTANTINE. SHE WAS THERE, AFTER ALL. *WITH ME.*

SHE KNOWS ALL MY SECRETS.

WE'RE NOT TAKING THE MALE DEMONS WITH US?

IF THERE'S ROOM, BUT THE FEMALES FIRST, IN CASE THOSE BLASTED AIRSHIPS START BOMBING THE FOREST.

YOU HEARD THE COLONEL WANTS TO STERILIZE THE DEMONS?

WHAT A FOOL. WE NEED THEM TO BREED.

OUR SCIENTISTS ARE TRYING TO ENCOURAGE ADDITIONAL LILIUM DEVELOPMENT IN THE WOMB.

THIS IS HUMILIATING.

WE ARE MARIUM-BLESSED, CREATED TO BE HOLY WARRIORS -- AND WHAT DO THEY HAVE US DOING?

CHAINING DEMONS FOR TRANSPORT.

HOW IS IT OUR FAULT THAT WE WERE OUTNUMBERED IN RAVENNA, BETRAYED BY THOSE CURSED INQUISITRIXES --

Y-YOU... YOU'RE ONE OF US.

W-WHY ARE YOU H-HELPING THEM?

HOW *DARE* YOU?!

WE'RE *HUMAN!*

SMAK

OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES.

CUMAEA WARP EVERYTHING, SOLDIER. REMEMBER THAT.

THE LAST TIME WE FOUGHT THIS WAR, THE LINES WERE CLEAR. BEAUTIFUL, EVEN. IT WAS HUMANS AGAINST DEMONS.

AND NOW WE'RE TURNING HUMANS *INTO* DEMONS.

I DON'T EVEN WANT TO KNOW WHAT'S NEXT.

WHEN DID THE RADIOS STOP RECEIVING?

THIRTY MINUTES AGO. WE THINK THE NEWLY ARRIVED DEMON SHIPS BEGAN JAMMING OUR SIGNALS.

COLONEL, JUST BEFORE THE RADIOS WENT OUT WE RECEIVED SOME...ODD PINGS... THAT WE CAN'T YET EXPLAIN. THE SIGNATURE WAS AERIAL, BUT LIKE NOTHING WE'VE EVER SEEN.

IT CAN'T BE OUR FORCES. OUR AERIAL REINFORCEMENTS ARE STILL A WEEK AWAY.

I WOULD URGE CAUTION, COLONEL. THE TROOPS WERE ALREADY UNNERVED BEFORE THE SIEGE OF RAVENNA, AND THE ARRIVAL OF THE ENEMY'S AIRSHIPS HAS SHAKEN MORALE FURTHER.

SOME UNITS HAVE ALREADY ABANDONED THEIR POSTS. IF THEY FIND OUT THE DEMONS ARE GATHERING EVEN MORE FORCES --

THEY'LL STAND THEIR GROUND.

AND IF THEY DON'T, I WILL TURN THEM OVER TO THE CUMAEA FOR VIVISECTION. I'VE HEARD IT'S QUITE A HORRIBLE WAY TO DIE.

BE SURE TO TELL THEM *THAT.*

ER...YES, COLONEL.

SPEAKING OF THE CUMAEA... A MEMBER OF THEIR HIGH COUNCIL HAS ARRIVED. SHE HAS REQUESTED TO SEE YOU.

MAYBE WHEN I'M DEAD. WILL THAT BE SOON ENOUGH?

IT COULD BE. BUT WHY TEMPT FATE?

COLONEL ANUWAT...SUCH A PLEASURE TO MEET YOU.

I AM THE LADY YVETTE LO LIM.

I'VE BEEN SENT BY THE CUMAEAN HIGH COUNCIL TO OFFER MY WISDOM DURING YOUR TIME OF NEED.

IF BY WISDOM YOU MEAN AIR SHIPS AND CANNONS, MAYBE I CAN SPARE YOU A MINUTE.

OTHERWISE, GOOD DAY.

OH, DON'T BE *SALTY*, COLONEL.

RAVENNA HASN'T GONE *WELL* FOR YOU, HAS IT? THERE HAVE BEEN A FEW BUMPS ALONG THE ROAD, YES? WAR NEVER GOES THE WAY WE WANT IT TO, MUCH LIKE LIFE.

WONDERFUL. A PHILOSOPHICAL WITCH.

I REMEMBER YOU NOW. FROM THE OLD DAYS.

YOU'VE BEEN IN SECLUSION FOR YEARS, HAVEN'T YOU? I HEARD RUMORS YOU BECAME UNSTABLE AFTER THE WAR.

DIDN'T GO WELL FOR YOU, EITHER, DID IT?

MAKES ME WONDER WHY THAT HIGH COUNCIL WOULD SEND *YOU* HERE, OF ALL PEOPLE. I THOUGHT THEY PRIDED THEMSELVES ON *REASON.*

LADY LO LIM! WHAT AN UNEXPECTED HONOR!

WHEN DID YOU ARRIVE? YOU MUST BE EXHAUSTED.

COME, LET US PREPARE A MEAL FOR YOU.

IN FACT, COLONEL ANUWAT...

...I DID COME BEARING GIFTS.

WHICH YOU'LL NEED VERY SOON IF YOU WANT YOUR TROOPS TO LIVE.

CONSTANTINE...

"THE BARONESS, APPARENTLY, LEFT CONSTANTINE WITH A FLEET OF AIRSHIPS.

"IT SEEMS AS THOUGH HER NEGOTIATION DEADLINE WASN'T AS FIRM AS SHE LED US TO BELIEVE."

HER DEMANDS ARE RIDICULOUS, RESAK. MURDER ALL THE CUMAEA?

THE PRIME MINISTER WILL NEVER AGREE TO THAT.

I WOULDN'T BE SO SURE, ATENA.

THE CUMAEA ARE A MASSIVE THREAT TO HER HOLD OVER THE FEDERATION. WITHOUT THEM SHE'D HAVE ACTUAL POWER INSTEAD OF BEING A GLORIFIED PUPPET.

YOU SUPPORT THIS, DON'T YOU?

I WOULD BE MURDERED. MY FRIENDS, PEOPLE I CARE ABOUT --

-- WHO COMMITTED ATROCITIES, REMEMBER?

NOT EVERY CUMAEA AGREES WITH WHAT'S BEEN DONE, BUT THEY'RE TOO FRIGHTENED TO CHALLENGE THE MOTHER SUPERIOR AND HIGH COUNCIL.

AND THE NOVICES... THEY'RE JUST CHILDREN. THEY ONLY KNOW WHAT THEY'VE BEEN TAUGHT.

ATENA, THE CUMAEA ARE A ROTTEN ORDER... AND THEIR NEED FOR LILIUM HAS BECOME UNCONTROLLABLE.

THEY WILL NEVER STOP HUNTING ARCANICS.

FATHER TAUGHT US TO DO THE RIGHT THING, NO MATTER THE PERSONAL COST.

=SIGH=

FATHER WARNED ME, BEFORE I AGREED TO SPY ON THE CUMAEA, THAT THE PRICE MIGHT BE TOO HIGH.

IF WHOLESALE MASSACRE IS THE ONLY WAY TO WIN, THEN HE WAS CORRECT.

ATENA... REMEMBER WHEN WE WERE CHILDREN...YOU'D COME HOME ON BREAK, AND FATHER WOULD TAKE US SAILING ALL THE WAY DOWN TO PONTUS?

IT WAS GOOD BEING IN A CITY WHERE HUMANS AND ARCANICS LIVED TOGETHER.

YOU'D CRY EVERY TIME WE HAD TO LEAVE --

OF COURSE I REMEMBER.

I WAS SO ANGRY TO BE A HUMAN BORN WITH POWER.

IT WAS UNFAIR THAT THE CUMAEA COULD TAKE ME FROM OUR HOME BECAUSE OF THAT.

BUT IT WAS THE LAW. IT STILL IS.

THAT'S WHY THIS ULTIMATUM IS SO WRONG. NONE OF THE CUMAEA HAD A CHOICE.

TELL THAT TO THE WITCHES WHO FLED THE FEDERATION. THEY CHOSE TO LEAVE RATHER THAN PARTICIPATE IN GENOCIDE.

THERE'S ALWAYS A CHOICE.

AHEM.

OH, DEAR. THIS IS QUITE THE ARGUMENT.

LADY ATENA AND COMMANDER RESAK, I PRESUME?

I AM NEKOMANCER REN MEMORIAN...AND I HAVE A PROPOSITION FOR YOU.

I SUPPOSE CORVIN BETRAYED MY IDENTITY.

OR THAT HATEFUL CAT.

NO ONE TOLD ME ANYTHING, TUYA.

I WAS ALWAYS HAPPY FOR YOU TO BE THE SMART ONE.

BUT THAT DIDN'T MEAN I WAS STUPID.

...SO... THIS IS THE MORTAL...WHO HAUNTS YOUR DREAMS...

...SUCH A HOLD...SHE HAS HAD... ON YOUR MIND...

...I THOUGHT... SHE MUST BE DEAD...

...I MISTOOK YOUR GRIEF...YOUR LOSS...

...I SEE NOW...WHAT YOU FELT...WAS BETRAYAL...

WHAT IS THAT THING SAYING, MAIKA?

MAIKA!

MISTER MONSTER IS SAYING YOU'RE A BAD PERSON.

AND THEY'RE GOING TO EAT YOU.

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GO BACK TO SLEEP, ZINN.

...CHILD...

...THERE IS A TIME...TO SLEEP...

...A TIME TO HIDE...AND OBSERVE...

...AND A TIME...TO BE SEEN...AND FEARED...

...YOUR ENEMIES...MUST KNOW...YOU ARE NOT ALONE...

MISS... YOU NEED TO REMEMBER THAT, TOO.

WHAT... WHAT IS THIS?!

...I... KNEW... YOU WOULD COME...

...SO PREDICTABLE...

GODDESS.

=GASP=

YOU SMELL... LIKE AN OLD... ENEMY...

MAIKA! MAIKA, DAMN YOU, WAKE UP!

CONTROL THAT THING!

BITCH, *YOU* CONTROL IT.

ISN'T THAT WHAT YOU WANT?

GET BACK, FIEND! I WILL DESTROY YOU!

HOLD THAT THOUGHT.

FINALLY.

GODDESS, I USED TO BE BETTER AT THIS.

AH, MAIKA... THERE ARE YOU ARE.

GRANDMOTHER.

HOW *OVERJOYED* I AM THAT YOU FINALLY SUMMONED ME. MY HEART HAS NOT BEEN THIS WARM IN A THOUSAND YEARS.

IT'S PAINED ME BEYOND WORDS TO HAVE KEPT MY DISTANCE.

ALAS, I PROMISED YOUR MOTHER IT WOULD BE YOUR CHOICE.

AND LOOK HERE! SO MANY FAMILIAR FACES!

CLEARLY I INTERRUPTED A MOST FASCINATING REUNION.

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WHAT A DELIGHT TO BE SURROUNDED BY FAMILY, IS IT NOT, GRAND-DAUGHTER?

YES.

A DELIGHT.

TO BE CONTINUED...

An excerpt from a lecture by the esteemed **Professor Tam Tam,** former First Record-Keeper of the Is'hami Temple, and learned contemporary of Namron Black Claw...

CATS SETTLED THE KNOWN WORLD LONG BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF THE ANCIENTS. IT WAS, BY ALL ACCOUNTS, A TIME OF PEACE -- THANKS TO OUR UNIFICATION UNDER THE WISE BANNER OF ADARA FARCLAW.

THE SCHOLARSHIP OF THE POETS WAS IN ITS INFANCY, SO PERHAPS THAT IS WHY THERE ARE NO TRUSTED RECORDS DESCRIBING THE MOMENT WHEN ANCIENTS DISCOVERED THIS WORLD, OR HOW THEY FIRST APPEARED TO OUR ANCESTORS.

THERE ARE LEGENDS, OF COURSE. THAT THE ANCIENTS HAD NOT YET ADOPTED THE FORMS WE SEE THEM IN NOW. THAT THEY WERE, IN FACT, MADE OF LIGHT INSTEAD OF FLESH -- AND THAT THEY DID NOT SETTLE THIS WORLD IMMEDIATELY, BUT DEPARTED AND DID NOT RETURN FOR FIVE HUNDRED YEARS.

WHY? SOME SAY IT WAS UBASTI HERSELF WHO DROVE THEM AWAY THE FIRST TIME.

IT IS SOMEWHAT STRIKING THAT WHEN THE ANCIENTS DID RETURN, IT WAS A SMALL GROUP, SMALLER THAN WHAT FOLLOWED LATER, AND THAT SOME OF THEIR QUEENS WORE THE FORMS OF THE JAGARAN.

IT IS ALSO SIGNIFICANT THAT THESE ANCIENTS DID NOT SETTLE THE LANDS TO THE NORTH, UNLIKE THOSE WHO ARRIVED LATER -- AND WHO FORMED THE DUSK AND DAWN COURTS.

INSTEAD THEY VENTURED DEEP INTO THE SOUTHERN SEAS TO CREATE A UNION WITH THE WAVE EMPRESS, WHO IS THE SECOND OF UBASTI'S GREAT ALLIES.

THE WAVE COURT ESTABLISHED ITSELF ON AN ISLAND FEW HAVE VISITED, AND WHOSE NAME IS PROTECTED BY THE SIRENS. THEIR ANCIENT SECRETS ARE AS MUCH A MYSTERY AS THE DEEP, AND THEIR ARCANIC CHILDREN WHO VENTURE INTO THE WORLD SEEM AS IGNORANT OF THE WAVE COURT'S FULL POWER AS THE REST OF US.

ODD, THAT THE DUSK AND DAWN COURTS BARELY ACKNOWLEDGE THE WAVE COURT'S EXISTENCE. THE POETS WOULD TELL YOU IT IS BECAUSE SOME BITTER ENMITY REMAINS UNRESOLVED BETWEEN THEM.

BUT OTHERS... SUCH AS MYSELF... SPECULATE THERE IS A MORE DISTURBING REASON.

THAT THE ANCIENTS OF THE DUSK AND DAWN ARE AFRAID OF THE WAVE COURT...AND DO NOT WANT TO DRAW ITS ATTENTION.

MONSTRESS FAN ART

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